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A NATIONAL POLICY FOR TIMBER LANDS

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
FOREST SERVICE
Lake States Forest Experiment Station

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Today, forest resources are more important than ever to the security and prosperity of the United States. We have been blessed with an abundance of forest land, which has contributed immeasurably to building up this country and helping us to world leadership. But, until recent years, most of our forests were exploited with little or no thought to the future. We cannot afford this luxury again. Faced with the possibilities of a continuing emergency, common sense demands that we care for and use wisely this great resource so essential not only to a high standard of living but to our national defense. Under such a policy of wise use, present timber growth could be increased, and our requirements for a multitude of essential commodities could be met without detriment to the watershed, wildlife, range, or recreational values of the forest.

With population on the increase and an expanded national defense effort now under way, emergency requirements for construction material, crating and boxing, paper, and many other products of the forest can be expected to mount. It is timely, therefore, that we take a fresh look at our position with regard to our forests and work towards a realistic and coordinated policy, easily understood and generally acceptable.

In World War II we cut deeply into our forest resources; it was part of the price of victory. For example, we put 25 billion board feet of lumber per year, or over half of the total national production, into military uses, compared to only about 300 million board feet, or less than 2 percent as much, in normal times. In the days ahead when undoubtedly we shall again have to expand the use of forest resources to help defend our way of life, let us do so as efficiently as possible, and with a look to the future.

In the past half century we have learned much about reproducing and growing crops of trees and forage, and how to use their products more economically and efficiently. We have also learned much about managing watersheds, the range, and wildlife habitat. How to get this knowledge more generally applied is a real challenge. Certainly a strong and prosperous nation will require an abundance of forest products. Conversely, waste and inefficiency in the handling of these forest resources can invite disaster. It takes many years to grow a forest, but only a few minutes to destroy one!

1/ Paper delivered at the Sixteenth North American Wildlife Conference at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, March 6, 1951.

2/ Maintained by the U. S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, in cooperation with the University of Minnesota, University Farm, St. Paul, Minnesota.

What is our forest situation today? We need to know this to plan intelligently. Originally covering about half of the land surface of the United States, forests now occupy only about one-third of the total land area. Although we can anticipate minor shifts of some forest to cropland, it probably will be about offset by abandonment of cropland, so we need expect no great change in total forest area. Only about two-thirds of these forest lands can produce commercial crops of timber; the balance consists of areas which are too remote to be utilized, are chiefly valuable for soil and watershed protection, hunting, fishing, and other recreational use, and are inherently unproductive of timber, or are devoted exclusively to park purposes. We will concern ourselves here only with the commercial forests which cover 460 million acres of land.

What do these forests mean to us? Foremost, they provide us with cellulose or wood -- a material with thousands of uses — so essential to everyday life. Recent estimates show that about 55 percent of the timber harvested each year goes into lumber, 18 percent into fuel wood, 11 percent into pulpwood, and the balance into veneer logs, hewn railroad ties, round mine timbers, fence posts, cooperage, shingles, poles, and a multitude of other items. The value of these wood products — their harvesting, manufacture, transportation, and sale — puts several billions of dollars annually into the channels of commerce and provides a source of livelihood for more than 3 million people. Many a community receives its major support from forest enterprises. In addition, the livestock products from the forest ranges, the enormous wildlife and recreational values, and the priceless protection which forests afford soils and watersheds represent an asset almost beyond computation.

Who owns the forests? Three-fourths of all commercial forest land belongs to more than 4 million private owners, many of them farmers. In general, these are the more productive lands. Presently about 90 percent of the nation's forest production comes from these private lands. The nation, therefore, must look to private forests for most of its present and future supplies of forest products. The remaining one-fourth of the commercial forest is in national, state, county, municipal, and school forests, on Indian lands or on the public domain.

There is a growing realization nowadays that ownership of a natural resource carries with it a responsibility as well as a privilege. Forest owners have a major responsibility in properly caring for their forests. On the other hand, every American shares the responsibility for making possible the continued productiveness of these vitally important resources which are basic to our well-being. Thus, the general public should encourage and assist private owners to keep their timberlands productive. The Forest Service believes in building up our forest resources through individual initiative and cooperative endeavor under reasonable rules adopted through democratic processes. It believes that such rules are as necessary to resource management as they are to transportation, communication, and other enterprises that affect the public welfare.

What is the condition of the forests? A Forest Service appraisal made a few years ago showed that American forests are growing at a rate far below their productive capacity. This is due mainly to past treatment -- as a rule, forests were overcut, burned, and generally uncared for. As a matter of fact, for many years it was believed that most of the cut-over land would be suited to and needed for farming -- often, however, this did not prove to be the case. After the original old-growth forest was harvested, mostly during the last century, nature reclothed some of the land with a new timber stand, although many tracts were entirely denuded. However, unaided, natural restocking could not keep pace with cutting and fires. At present, less than 50 percent of our commercial forest land bears saw-timber stands.

Foresters tell us that we are still cutting saw timber faster than it is being replaced through growth, although the over-all cubic volume of annual forest growth and drain is almost in balance. Our softwood stands in particular are continuing to shrink, whereas the amount of lesser used and lesser valued hardwoods is on the increase. It is estimated that we have at least 50 million acres of understocked or deforested but potentially productive lands that can be rehabilitated only by planting. (At present rates, it would take more than 100 years to complete this task.) About 70 million acres of forest and watershed lands do not yet have organized fire protection, although a first principle of good forestry demands such protection. An urgent reason for 100-percent fire protection now is its importance to the country's defense activities. Protection from harmful diseases and insects is often more important than protection from fire and gives a continuing battle to forestry agencies. Many miles of new roads are needed to make possible the orderly harvesting of inaccessible old-growth timber on public lands in the West before it becomes decadent. Many western forest ranges have deteriorated due to overgrazing, and many woodland areas in the East need protection from livestock for maximum productiveness. Locally, deer and other wildlife species have become over-abundant and destroyed tree reproduction. Evidences of excessive soil erosion on forest lands are commonplace. All this should dispel any complacency we might have as to the adequacy of present forestry practices. Also, let us not forget that forestry is a long-time undertaking -- a tree planted today may not be harvested for 40 to 100 years!

Not until the early part of this century was a real start made towards the practice of forestry in this country. During the last 50 years, through trial and research, much has been learned about how best to care for forests to make them renewable and productive, and how to get maximum utilization from each tree harvested. The national forests, which make up 16 percent of the nation's commercial forest area, have been organized and placed under management. Last fiscal year (ending June 30, 1950) they yielded a total revenue of almost 34 million dollars (timber - 3.5 billion board feet worth $29,379,217; grazing - 1.1 million cattle and horses, and 3.1 million sheep and goats, $3,385,004: and miscellaneous receipts - $830,393); and this year the total promises to go much higher. (During the last 6 months of 1950, national forest receipts totaled $27,000,000.) A good share of this (25 percent) is returned to the states to be expended for the benefit of public schools and public roads within the counties where the national forests are located.

This group is, of course, interested primarily in wildlife. It is probably superfluous to mention to you, then, that the national forests constitute a hunting and fishing ground equivalent to about one-tenth of the total land area of the United States. As you know, the states make and enforce the laws necessary to protect and utilize these wildlife resources; the Forest Service gives primary attention to maintaining a habitat suited to wildlife. (It is estimated that 2,440,000 head of big game animals find shelter and food within the national forests.) Close cooperative relations between the states and the Forest Service have helped promote good hunting and fishing consistent with the protection and development of all the resources. Although wildlife on the national forests is often one of the major resource values, the Forest Service has in recent years been handicapped in habitat management work because of curtailment in regular funds for this purpose.

State forestry work, including the organized protection of state and private forests from fire, has made good progress in the last quarter century. A program of public aid in providing technical forestry assistance to small owners is now well under way. In the last 10 years industry has sponsored campaigns for better forestry, such as the "Tree Farm" and "Keep Green" programs. Here in Wisconsin there is an excellent example of industry leadership for better forestry in the work of "Trees for Tomorrow," an organization sponsored by several pulp and paper companies to stimulate tree planting and better forestry on private lands. Management of privately owned forests to keep them continuously productive has increased greatly, particularly during the last decade. These private owners have a wonderful incentive to practice forestry -- they have found that it pays good dividends and that it lessens transportation and other costs. Above all, however, it assures a future supply of raw materials, without which this industry cannot exist. Many private operators are actively buying land in the vicinity of their plants.

Although many notable gains have been made in both public and private forestry, we are still a long way from a satisfactory forest economy in this country. As an example of the timber situation in a single region, let us take a look at the Lake States (Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota), where we are meeting today. From 1875 to 1900, this region led the nation in lumber production, turning out from one-fourth to one-third of all the lumber cut, and much of it was shipped throughout the country. Today, Lake States mills account for only 3 to 4 percent of national lumber production, which does not begin to take care of the region's own needs; almost two-thirds of the lumber used here has to be imported, much of it from the Pacific Coast, at a very high cost in freight alone.

The decline in lumbering has been offset in recent years by the growth of the pulp and paper industry. The Lake States region now produces more than 3 million tons of paper and board annually, or about one-sixth of the output of the nation. Yet it must import one-fourth of the pulpwood it uses. With good forestry practices and over a period of time, this trend can be reversed -- not only can the Lake States region grow all the forest raw materials it needs, it can also have a balance for export.

There is little to be gained in placing the blame for mistakes of the past, although we do want to be assured that the same thing will not happen again. It is of more value now to take stock of our situation and decide how we can work together constructively for the future. This requires a broad plan or policy on which the majority can agree and within the framework of which we can strive toward an improved forest situation commensurate with our national needs. To build up the nation's forest resources so as to meet anticipated future demands and to place forestry on a sound business basis, a 3-point program has often been recommended by the Forest Service. This includes (1) an expanded program of public aid and service to private forest owners, including (a) more technical assistance to improve tree growth and obtain better use of wood, (b) additional help for nurseries and planting, (c) setting up a forest credit and insurance system, (d) improving tax laws where needed, (e) providing all state and private forest land with an adequate cooperative program of protection from fire, insects, and diseases, and (f) a strengthening of forest research; (2) a system of public regulation of cutting and other forest practices that will keep forest lands reasonably productive, recognizing that such legislation or government direction will fail without full understanding and backing of the public at large; (states that have made notable headway in this direction include Washington, Oregon, California, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, and Virginia among others); and (3) expansion and intensified protection and management of all public forests, many of which are at present inaccessible or too thinly manned to yield their potential forestry values.

The present strength and future security of our nation depend in part on the abundance and productiveness of its forests. The values at stake concern industry, labor, the tax base, and the perpetuation of our free institutions. They must therefore be of concern to every citizen. To build these forests to full strength, to keep them abundantly productive, and to utilize them in full measure for human progress will require real partnership of effort, with public agencies, landowners, forest industries, labor, and the public at large all working together. Here is an opportunity to show the world an example of progress under the democratic way of life. Let's make this a better forested country for future generations in which to live and work.